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Too Many Rented Rooms: Creative Expression in the Tibetan Community and the Foreign Artist

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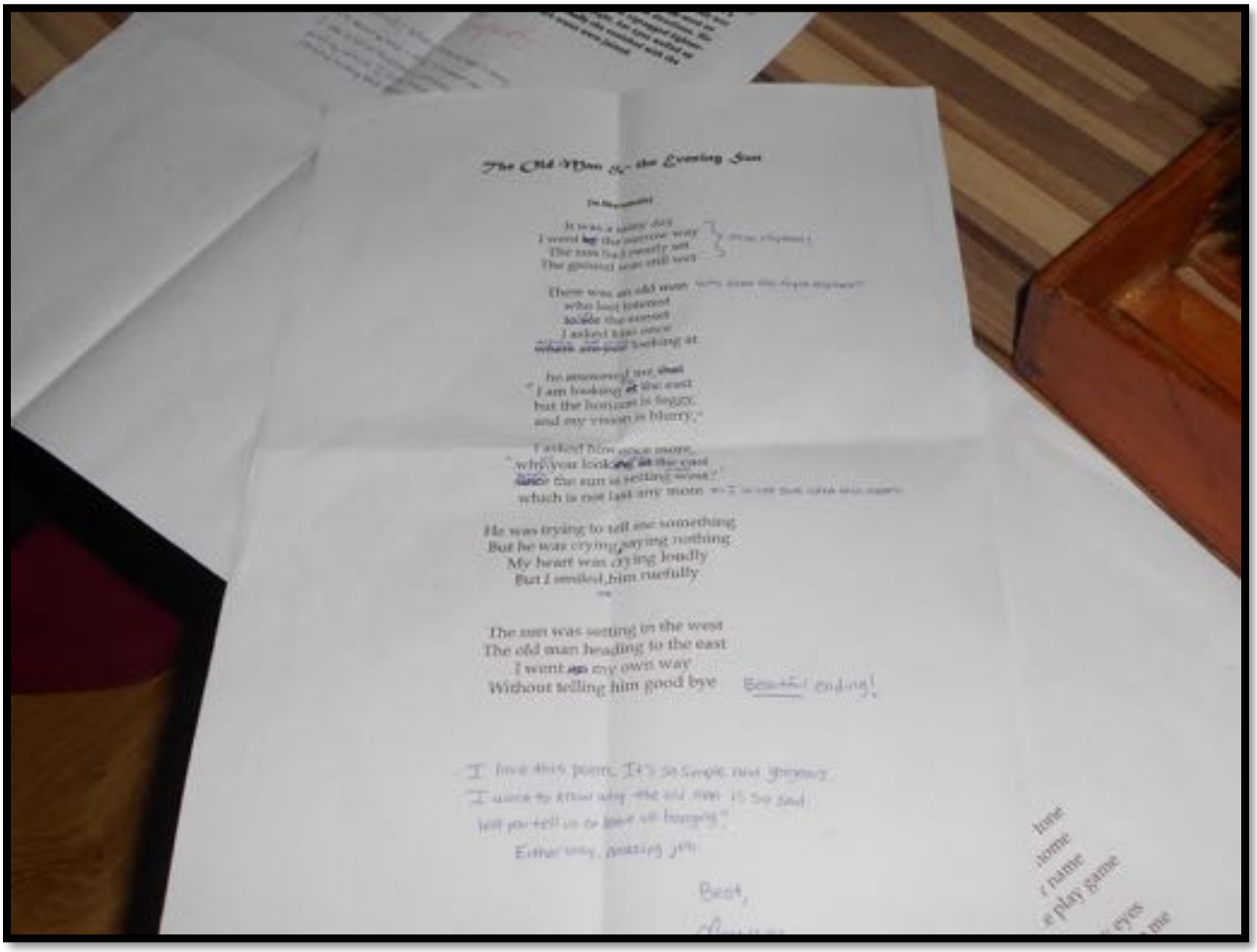

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"Literature is a sacred instrument and though the proper use of it we can combat the forces of ignorance and prejudice and foster national unity and world communion. Literature must voice the past, reflect the present and mould the future. Inspired language, *tejomayi vak*, will help readers to develop a human and liberal outlook on life, to understand the world in which they live, to understand themselves and plan sensibly for their future."

–Sarvapalli Radharikrishnan

"This incongruous sight of Tibetans in a foreign land finally convinced me that I should tell my story in writing, not to advertise my suffering but as a testament to my country's torment. In this way I could show that while I may be free, my country was still occupied."

--Palden Gyatso

Table of Contents

Abstract……...…….1

Acknowledgements……...……...2

Introduction……...……...5

Methodology……...…….9

I: Tibetan Poets on Tibetan Poetry…….14

Tenzin Tsundue……..14

Tenzin Nyinjey……...16

Bhuchung D. Sonam……..19

Ten Phun……21

II: From Refugees to Writers……24

Tenzin Wangyal……25

Kunga Rinchen……...28

Conclusions……31

III: A Voice for the Silent……..33

Dolma-lak……..33

Nyima-lak……..36

Tashi-lak……38

Conclusion: Tell the World I'm Coming Home……40

Appendix……42

Bibliography……..50

Suggestions for Future Research……...52

Abstract

Though Tibetan society has always had a literary and creative bent, the genre of secular Tibetan poetry is still very much burgeoning. One of the most unexpected consequences of the Chinese occupation of Tibet and the subsequent exile of thousands of Tibetans has been the emergence of a new genre of testimonial writing by refugees, the majority of which is written in the English language. The corpus of work within this genre is still relatively small, but growing all the time, and this expansion begs several complex questions, foremost of which is what purpose such writing serves and to whom it is directed. This paper will provide an overview of the progression towards self-expression in modern Tibetan literature, beginning with the ways in which it departs from tradition. It will also profile some of the most prominent Tibetan poets in exile and their views on the function of written testimonies, their efficacy in the Free Tibet movement and their predictions for the genre in the future. Also included will be an account of the author's attempts to promote personal writing in the exile community of Dharamsala (the home of the His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and the site of the Tibetan government in exile). The paper will conclude with a consideration of the possible roles and responsibilities of foreign writers in Tibetan communities in exile through the author's own efforts to record the stories of Tibetan refugees with limited English language proficiency in a creative testimonial format written from the perspective of an outsider. These elements combined provide a fairly complete summary of the current state of creative self-expression among Tibetans in exile.

Acknowledgements

This project would be an absolute shambles without the dedicated assistance of some, the cooperation of many, and the love of a choice few. I infinitely prefer the person I am now to the person I was when I began this research, and that person is largely a product of the connections made, friendships fostered, and kindnesses offered during my stay in McLeod Ganj. In no particular order, I wish to recognize those who have transformed me and my outlook.

To the students of SIT, thank you for your unwavering support and constant friendliness despite our differences. The pain of feeling alone in a foreign place can be crippling, so I appreciate your company and value your input during my times of crisis.

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Tenzin-lak, you deserve at least twenty percent of the credit for the success of this project. Your tireless efforts on my behalf were never properly recognized, so this is the beginning of a much longer thank you that I will continue on my next trip to Dharamsala (on a tourist visa!).

Tsundue-lak, when we first met at the café near the CTA, you inspired me to pursue this topic more closely. In many ways, you *are* the inspiration for this project. You motivated me at my most confused and lent me confidence until I could develop my own. I will be blessed if I become even half the poet, activist and all-around person that you are.

Bhuchung-lak, I rushed in and out of your life without much introduction or ceremony, yet you welcomed me and my ill-phrased questions. I've already told you how influential your work has been on my life. Meeting you was a dream and a privilege. Thank you so much for making time and space for me in your undoubtedly crowded life.

Tenzin Nyinjey-lak, I had one of the most enjoyable, enlightening conversations of my life with you. You have a way of phrasing your ideas which is eloquent, simple and accurate—a talent few people possess. Thank you for your insight.

Ten-lak, you have so much talent and intuition. Thank you for speaking so candidly with me—I only wish we had met earlier!

Yeshi-lak, Dolma-lak, and the staff of Tibet World, I cannot thank you enough for the amazing opportunity to join your community and learn from your students. I loved every minute of my time at Tibet World and hope to return as soon as possible.

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Wangyal-lak, thank you for your priceless contributions to my class, the dedication you showed each and every day we worked together, and, yes, the drinks you bought me at Pancake Crepe. Stay in touch and keep writing!

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for all the times you bought my drinks at Pancake Crepe using the excuse that I was your "gen-lak."

To all of the students at Gu Chu Sum, thank you so incredibly much for welcoming me into your conversation class, working so hard to communicate with me, and being so generous with your stories. You are all so smart and kind, and I wish I could come spend time with you every day for the rest of my life. I *will* be back, so don't forget about me!

Introduction: Tibetan Literature in Context

The Tibetan literary culture has a rich and diverse history. Beginning with the scriptures on the roof of the royal palace of *Lha tho tho ri*, creative composition among Tibetans has developed steadily since the 4th century A.D.[1] It would not be entirely accurate to claim that no personally-focused literature existed in Tibetan culture prior to the 20th century—biographies (*mam thar*), pilgrimage accounts (*lam yig*), political memoirs[2], and even "songs of experience" boasting of individual accomplishments (*nams mgur)*[3] existed long before this time. However, it would be equally inaccurate to claim that testimonial literature was anything but underrepresented before the 1950s. Before the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet, around the 8th century A.D., oral storytelling reigned, and very little written material existed.[4] Because of this, literary text was strongly associated with religion from the beginning, and for much of Tibetan history, only monks, rinpoches, and other holy men were literate. As a result, the majority of Tibetan literature centers on Buddhism, whether it be dharma teachings, hagiographies of prominent religious figures, or prayers. In the words of the Tibetan scholar Roger R. Jackson, "Just as modern poets faithfully reflect the central, if not universal, concerns of their culture, e.g., the individual's quest for meaning and certainty in an ambiguous world, so Tibetan poets have faithfully reflected their culture's normative, if not universal, concern: the individual's relationship to the attainment of enlightenment."[5] This strong religious link has limited the amount of personal stories told in writing throughout Tibetan history because they directly contradict the Buddhist doctrine of "no self" and the "subjugation of ego." It also sets most forms of indigenous Tibetan literature apart from that which originated in Western countries, as

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[1] Pathak, Sunitil Kumar. "The Tibetan Literature and Its Development." *Bulletin of Tibetology*, n.d., 5.http://www.thlib.org/static/reprints/bot/bot_1996_02_01.pdf

[2] Ibid.

[3] Jackson, Roger R. "Poetry' in Tibet: Glu, mGur, sNyan Ngag and 'Songs of Experience." In *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre*, 1st ed., 368. Studies in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1996.http://www.thlib.org/encyclopedias/literary/genres/genres-book.php#!book=/studies-in-genres/b22/.

[4] Pathak, Sunitil Kumar. "The Tibetan Literature and Its Development." *Bulletin of Tibetology*, n.d., 7.http://www.thlib.org/static/reprints/bot/bot_1996_02_01.pdf.

[5] Jackson, Roger R. "Poetry' in Tibet: Glu, mGur, sNyan Ngag and 'Songs of Experience." In *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre*, 1st ed., 374. Studies in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1996.http://www.thlib.org/encyclopedias/literary/genres/genres-book.php#!book=/studies-in-genres/b22/.

does the particular focus of many Tibetan authors on rhythm, sound and meaning rather than imagery, meaning, and ornamentation.[6]

Dhondhup Gyal, considered the father of modern Tibetan poetry. Image courtesy of http://www.rangzen.net

The closest equivalent to Western confessional literature[7] in the Tibetan canon is the *nyams mgur* genre, which gained prominence with the legendary Tibetan poet and yogi Milarepa (*Mi la ras pa*) in the 11th century A.D.[8] *Nyams mgur* are often referred to as songs of "positive personal experience," and are thought to have inherited the early hallmarks of the secular oral storytelling tradition in Tibet, as well as some elements of tantric songs.[9] Whereas *gLu* poetry is musical and secular and *sNyan ngag* is much more ornate, *nyams mgur* fall somewhere between the two, finding a balance between secular and religious, oral and literary, personal and universal.[10] While they do tend to be based on personal experience, *nyams mgur* cannot be considered to be as intensely self-expressive as Western poetry since the rise of Romanticism. Dhondhup Gyal (*Don grub gyal*), considered the father of modern Tibetan poetry, once said, "[*nyams mgur* are] songs about the way in which experiential realizations arise from one's

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[6] Jackson, Roger R. "Poetry' in Tibet: Glu, mGur, sNyan Ngag and 'Songs of Experience." In *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre*, 1st ed., 368. Studies in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1996.http://www.thlib.org/encyclopedias/literary/genres/genres-book.php#!book=/studies-in-genres/b22/.

[7] Characterized by a first-person point of view and the revelation of the author's emotions, responses and/or darker motivations in the context of personal experience

[8] Jackson, Roger R. "Poetry' in Tibet: Glu, mGur, sNyan Ngag and 'Songs of Experience." In *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre*, 1st ed., 371. Studies in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1996.http://www.thlib.org/encyclopedias/literary/genres/genres-book.php#!book=/studies-in-genres/b22/.

[9] Jackson, Roger R. "Poetry' in Tibet: Glu, mGur, sNyan Ngag and 'Songs of Experience." In *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre*, 1st ed., 371. Studies in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1996.http://www.thlib.org/encyclopedias/literary/genres/genres-book.php#!book=/studies-in-genres/b22/.

[10] Ibid, 371.

having meditated on the guru's instructions."[11] Even the most confessional of poems in this style present their authors' internal struggles in the context of their progress on the path to enlightenment. Jackson argues that *nyams mgur* is more closely related to the religious poetry of the West than to confessional poetry, as the unifying theme of the genre is not merely personal experience but personal spiritual experience, and it often has a celebratory tone.[12] Furthermore, most of the poems in the genre utilize traditional stylistic and metrical parameters rather than free verse.[13]

Given the wide variation between Western testimonial poetry and the genre of Tibetan writing that most closely resembles it, it might once have seemed improbable that the two styles would ever come close to converging. Interestingly, though *nyams mgur* compromise only a very small portion of the Tibetan poetic tradition, the genre is among the most popular, and a disproportionate number of the best known Tibetan poems are written in this style.[14] This anomaly suggests that the relatability of these poems appealed to a wide audience, and perhaps set the stage for the literary transformation that occurred in the mid-20th century. With the Chinese occupation of Tibet and the resultant diaspora, the amount of contact Tibetans experienced with the rest of the world spiked sharply, and the literature from this period onwards has reflected this change.

Modern Tibetan writings—here defined as those composed less than sixty years ago--have deviated sharply from traditional usages. Instead of focusing on Buddhist history, philosophy and folklore, a secular genre emerged; some scholars even claim that no nonspiritual literature existed in the Tibetan canon prior to the 1980s.[15] Traumatized by the events of the

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[11] Jackson, Roger R. "Poetry' in Tibet: Glu, mGur, sNyan Ngag and 'Songs of Experience." In *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre*, 1st ed., 373. Studies in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1996.http://www.thlib.org/encyclopedias/literary/genres/genres-book.php#!book=/studies-in-genres/b22/.
[12] Jackson, Roger R. "Poetry' in Tibet: Glu, mGur, sNyan Ngag and 'Songs of Experience." In *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre*, 1st ed., 373. Studies in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1996.http://www.thlib.org/encyclopedias/literary/genres/genres-book.php#!book=/studies-in-genres/b22/.
[13] Jackson, Roger R. "Poetry' in Tibet: Glu, mGur, sNyan Ngag and 'Songs of Experience." In *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre*, 1st ed., 374. Studies in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1996.http://www.thlib.org/encyclopedias/literary/genres/genres-book.php#!book=/studies-in-genres/b22/.
[14] Jackson, Roger R. "Poetry' in Tibet: Glu, mGur, sNyan Ngag and 'Songs of Experience." In *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre*, 1st ed., 374. Studies in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1996.http://www.thlib.org/encyclopedias/literary/genres/genres-book.php#!book=/studies-in-genres/b22/.
[15] Tsering, Shakya. "The Waterfall and Fragrant Flowers: The Development of Tibetan Literature Since 1950."*Manoa* 12, no. 2 (2000): 29. https://muse-jhu-edu.resources.library.brandeis.edu/journals/manoa/v012/12.2tsering_shakya.pdf.

Chinese Cultural Revolution and forced into exile, Tibetan intellectuals such as Dhondhup Gyal considered how best to make the world understand the horrors their people were experiencing. Some settled upon confessional writing in English as an effective method of evoking extreme emotion in audiences across the world, with the added advantage of alleviating some of the emotional distress they themselves suffered. This decision transformed Tibetan literature.

For the first time, the media of poetry and fiction were considered viable vessels for personal self-expression, simultaneously therapeutic and reflective of larger political and societal conflicts. Tibetans, especially youth born in exile, responded with a steady stream of creative testimonials in the English language, which has continued into the present day. It was into this newly open and communicative society that I stepped when I began my investigation of modern Tibetan self-expression.

Methodology

My research was conducted primarily in McLeod Ganj, the home of the Dalai Lama in exile as well as a significant Tibetan community, though some interviews were conducted in Dharamsala. The research model was threefold: a third of my time was spent interviewing well-known Tibetan writers living in exile, a third teaching (and preparing to teach) a creative writing workshop at the adult education center Tibet World, and a third volunteering in a conversation class at Gu Chu Sum, an NGO that caters to former political prisoners and other recently-escaped refugees from Tibet. All three of the research segments were conducted simultaneously. Each segment was intended to serve a different function and provide insight into a different aspect of modern self-expression among Tibetans in exile.

I conducted four interviews with prominent poets living in or near McLeod Ganj over the course of four weeks, with one interview per week. I was interested in why they wrote testimonial poetry in English and what they hoped to accomplish through their writing. I had never met any of the poets I interviewed prior to our arranged meetings, Tenzin Tsundue, whom I had met on a previous trip to India in October 2015. I obtained contact information for each interviewee either from the SIT Dharamsala program coordinator, Tenzin Youdon, or from a previous interviewee. I scheduled appointments with potential subjects via SMS or phone. Subjects dictated the location of their interviews: two of the interviews (Tenzin Tsundue and Bhuchung D. Sonam) were conducted in the interview subjects' homes, one (Tenzin Nyinjey) at the subject's place of employment, and one (Ten Phun) at a café. In all but one of the interviews, I brought the subject a small gift to thank them for their time—baked goods of some kind—and I paid for Ten Phun's meal at the café where we met. Two of the subjects were born in exile, and two in Tibet. I made a few attempts to contact acclaimed Tibetan writers living outside of India (Jamyang Norbu, Tsering Wangmo Dhompa) via email but was unsuccessful. I also struggled to find female and fiction writers to interview, which is a testament to their dearth in the McLeod Ganj settlement.

In preparation for each interview, I did extensive research on the subject, reading his book(s) and article(s) closely, as well as other interviews he gave (when available). I chose not to record the interviews but rather to engage with the speaker as much as possible while jotting notes on the conversations. Some of the questions I posed to interviewees remained constant

regardless of their identity; these included why they write, when they began writing, where they believe the merit lies in telling individual stories, and what they think the role of foreign writers should be in the Free Tibet movement. All other questions varied based on the background of the individual subjects, their responses to the standardized questions, and my own impressions of their work. I transcribed my notes on their responses in my field journal shortly after each interview. No translator was necessary for any of the interviews, as all subject were fluent in English. I supplemented my personal interviews with interviews from other sources to ensure that I captured the perspective of each poet thoroughly and accurately.

I also taught a two-week long creative writing workshop at Tibet World in an attempt to explore the question of how members of the exile community would respond when given the tools to tell their own stories in English. For this portion of the research, I reached out to several education NGOs in McLeod Ganj with a detailed proposal of the workshop, including a sample lesson plan, a teaching resume, and my Application for Human Subjects Review. The academic director at Tibet World, Yeshi Dhondup, and the Vice President at Gu Chu Sum, Namgyal Dolkar Lhagyari, both responded with interest. I was unable to meet with either of them during the first week of the research period due to their heavy involvement in the upcoming Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) parliament elections, but met with both in the second week. Yeshi-lak and his education officer, Dolma-lak, were enthusiastic about the idea when I met with them and promised to advertise the course to their students.

I began teaching on 12 November 2015, and taught through 25 November 2015—a total of ten days. The course was held from 12 to 1 pm, Monday through Friday, in a classroom at the Tibet World center, on Jogiwara Road in McLeod Ganj. Tibet World is a relatively new organization aimed at educating Tibetan adults (ages 18 and above), located next to a monastery; therefore, many of its students are monks. Approximately 50% of the students have been born in exile.

I wrote detailed lesson plans for each of the classes I taught, making sure to include primary learning objectives and an approximate schedule (see Appendix for examples). I knew prior to beginning the course that I would have students with a wide range of English language proficiency, so I worked with Dolma-lak, Tenzin Tsundue-lak and Tenzin Youdon-lak to develop several clear lessons with simple language and interactive activities, as well as different

assignments for beginner, intermediate, and advanced English speakers, I also developed a simple, brief after-class evaluation, given anonymously at the end of each class for students to give me feedback on the helpfulness and difficulty of the class and any suggestions they may have had for improvement (see Appendix for example). I made sure to emphasize confidentiality at the beginning of each class, and began the course by specifying that I would never put pressure on students to share their work or remain in class if they felt uncomfortable with the subject matter. I also gave the class my email and Indian phone number, encouraging them to contact me for any reason at any time, and allowed students to write in whatever language they felt most comfortable. I assured them that I would never read or publicize their work without their explicit permission. I gave a brief summary of my research on the first day and made it clear that one of the reasons I was teaching the course was to supplement this research, but clarified that I would not include students or their work in my research without their consent. All student information and writing included in this paper is used with prior and express oral consent.

Despite my efforts to accommodate all levels, it seems that many of those initially interested found the class to be too challenging. I began with ten students (mostly male—only two females were present), but after the first two days, the class size had dropped to four, and by the fifth day, I only had three regular students. I found that students would rarely answer in the negative when I asked them if they understood what I had just said, even if they appeared to be lost. I offered to get my lesson plans translated into Tibetan and distribute them to anyone who wanted them, but several students insisted that this would not be necessary. Students seemed puzzled by the after-class evaluations and often struggled to complete them, so I quickly stopped administering them, as they proved less useful than anticipated. None of the students who left after the first few days completed any of the writing assignments I had given.

After each class, I completed a teaching reflection, in which I asked myself what went well, what didn't go as planned, what I would do differently and what I learned. I used the answers to these questions to inform and/or alter my lesson plan for the following day, as well as to reflect on the experience as a whole. I consulted with Dolma-lak after the class size dropped so dramatically, and we reviewed my lesson plans once more for possible improvements, but apart from some minor rephrasings, we could identify no major flaws. This of course does not

mean that there were no flaws to be identified, only that we were unable to do so. Dolma-lak later expressed via email that she "couldn't understand why some of our students left," but mentioned that those who remained were among Tibet World's best. I wish to clarify that I still believe it is both possible and important to encourage new English language learners to write creatively—I strongly agree with Gill Jacobs' assertion that "The learner should use new language as soon as they can,"[16]—and hope to reattempt a writing course aimed at lower-level English students in the future.

The three students that completed the workshop (two men and one woman) were tremendously dedicated, engaged and talented. They were all fairly fluent in English. The two men began to invite me for tea at a nearby café after every class to discuss their writing and any specific or personal questions they had about the writing process. We met in this setting after six of the ten classes. These conversations complemented the data I collected in class very well, so I chose to include some of the information we discussed over tea in this paper, also with explicit verbal consent.

Though Namgyal-lak initially supported my idea to conduct a writing workshop at Gu Chu Sum, when we met to review my plans, we both decided that most of the students at Gu Chu Sum do not have the level of English language proficiency needed even for a very basic course of this kind. Instead, I began volunteering daily in the conversation class held between 4 and 5:30 pm daily at the Gu Chu Sum School. I taught students basic conversation and useful phrases, while simultaneously gently encouraging them to share their stories with me. I then wrote creative pieces about the students using the stories they shared, as a method of experimenting with empowering individual Tibetans who are unable to easily share their experiences in English. I then analyzed this process to determine if it is a valid and useful method of emphasizing the diversity among Tibetans and shattering the harmful misconception of Tibetan refugees as "white doves."

I repeatedly ensured that the students understood that I was there to conduct research as well as serve them, and obtained clear consent whenever I recorded their words or took their photographs. In order to do this, I worked individually and with Tenzin Youdon-lak to draft an

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[16]James, Gill. 2006. "Writing Creatively in Another Language." *Teaching English as a Foreign Language*. http://www.tefl.net/esl-articles/creative-writing.htm.

explanation of informed consent in very basic language, and only used their statements if I was convinced that they understood what they were agreeing to. I followed my explanation of consent with questions which tested their comprehension, such as “Do you need to say yes to me?” “Will I be angry if you tell me no?” and “Will I tell your real name?” On my last day at the Gu Chu Sum School, I gave notebooks to all of my students to thank them for their willingness to participate in my research and their efforts to make me feel welcome.

During my time in McLeod Ganj, I lived in an apartment with two other American students in an attempt to limit the inherent bias that comes with living with members of the community I was studying. I felt this was particularly important given my goal to promote individuality and establish the diversity of this community—I feared that, if I chose to live in a homestay, my limited exposure to Tibetan home life would lead me to generalize based on my experiences in the household of the particular family with which I stayed rather than explore and interact with a variety of refugees in McLeod Ganj. I also made an effort to read as much modern Tibetan literature as possible, from as many different sources and authors as possible, to ensure I had a relatively complete impression of the current state of Tibetan writing. Because my sample sizes were so small, and my time and access to sources was limited, the conclusions I will draw over the course of this paper cannot be considered definitive, and I hope to continue my exploration of this topic in the coming years.

I: Tibetan Poets on Tibetan Poetry

As the popularity of Tibetan testimonial poetry increases, those who have published works in this style have begun to gain distinction, both within and without refugee communities. Ironically, the same poets who work to establish their individuality often come to represent the Tibetan people to the rest of the world. On the surface, many Tibetan poets appear to comment on the same issue—their exile from Tibet--but no two tell the same story, nor do they emphasize the same values in their work. They are unified as modern Tibetans who write creatively in English, and may even agree on some matters, but vary in their motivations and intentions. The following profiles offer insight into the numerous purposes served by English-language exile literature and the people who use it as a mouthpiece.

Tenzin Tsundue

Tenzin Tsundue reading from his latest book of poetry, Kora. Image courtesy of friendsoftibet.org

Born in Manali to Tibetan refugees forced to work in labor camps after fleeing their motherland, Tenzin Tsundue grew up in a constant state of displacement. Easily identifiable by the red headband he has vowed to wear until Tibet is free, Tsundue-lak spends much of his time engaged in active protest against the Chinese occupation of Tibet, and has gained international notoriety for his public demonstrations, which often aim to attract media attention to the Tibetan independence movement. He has been imprisoned many times in both India and Tibet for his audacious actions, and is frequently critiqued for being too passionate, angry, or rash.

He defines himself as a "writer-activist," and, though his writing is deeply personal, he uses it strategically. The tone of his poetry is complex, a cross between fiery, melancholy and mournful. His first book of poems, entitled *Crossing the Border,* was published in 1999, and since that time he has published another book of poems, a book of essays, and countless articles in Indian and Tibetan news sources. He is also a frequent contributor to the Tibet Writes project.

Tsundue-lak has described his experience as an exile as "a state of perpetual uncertainty, dreaming against all reason of return to an unseen homeland."[17] For him, poetry serves multiple purposes, chief among them the assuagement of his "restlessness,"[18] the expression of his frustration, and the representation of the perpetual state of limbo in which exiled Tibetans live.

Unsurprisingly for such an avid activist, there is a sense of social responsibility inherent in Tsundue-lak's writing. "[Poets] have a responsibility to write for others….Why focus on yourself if your experiences are not relatable?" he commented.[19] Unwilling to let Tibetans watch their lives and culture collapsing in silence, Tsundue gives voice to their pain. For example, in his poem "Betrayal," he captures the internal struggle so many Tibetans face when deciding whether to remain nonviolent or fight for their country:

> People say we should be
> Peaceful and Non-Violent.
> So I forgive our enemy.
> But sometimes I feel
> I betrayed my father.[20]

He believes strongly that the stereotyping of Tibetans as uniformly peaceful and calm dehumanizes them, which in turn prevents the outside world from empathizing with them. In his opinion, those who can write in English have an obligation to challenge these harmful misconceptions through personal narrative.[21]

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[17] Hall, Miranda. "I Am a Terrorist: An Interview with Tenzin Tsundue." The Isis, April 27, 2014.http://isismagazine.org.uk/2014/04/i-am-a-terrorist-an-interview-with-tenzin-tsundue/.
[18] Tsundue, Tenzin. 3 November 2015 Interview by Imogen Rosenbluth.
[19] Tsundue, Tenzin. 3 November 2015 Interview by Imogen Rosenbluth.
[20] Tsundue, Tenzin. 2007. "Betrayal." *TibetWrites*. December 26.http://www.tibetwrites.net/?Betrayal.
[21] Tsundue, Tenzin. 3 November 2015 Interview by Imogen Rosenbluth.

Tsundue-lak admits that growing up in India and studying English literature at the University of Bombay has influenced his writing style considerably. When asked why he chose not to write in a traditional Tibetan style, he explained that the "history, education and orientation [of traditional Tibetan poets] is very different to mine" and added that "my writings are more monologues, a direct communication…The language is very simple, and that's why I think it works, because when it's heard people identify with it."[22] His goal is not to preserve Tibetan literary culture with his writing but rather to address his audience on their own terms, forcing them to understand where he comes from and how he lives. Born in exile, he brings not nostalgia but harsh truth to his writing—including the "injustice and the apathy about Tibet from the Western world."[23]

In his opinion, writers serve to "express concerns and...speak the heart of the common people."[24] While Tibetan writers have a responsibility to share their own stories, foreign writers in Tibetan refugee settlements should "give Tibetans the gift of being able to tell their stories to a good listener, and having them retold."[25]

Tenzin Nyinjey

Tenzin Nyinjey outside of the Central Tibetan Administration. Image courtesy of tibetsun.com

[22] Cahill, Michelle. "Tenzin Tsundue in Conversation with Michelle Cahill."Mascara Review, January 1, 2011. http://mascarareview.com/tenzin-tsundue-in-conversation-with-michelle-cahill/.
[23] Cahill, Michelle. "Tenzin Tsundue in Conversation with Michelle Cahill."Mascara Review, January 1, 2011. http://mascarareview.com/tenzin-tsundue-in-conversation-with-michelle-cahill/.
[24] Cahill, Michelle. "Tenzin Tsundue in Conversation with Michelle Cahill."Mascara Review, January 1, 2011. http://mascarareview.com/tenzin-tsundue-in-conversation-with-michelle-cahill/.
[25] Tsundue, Tenzin. 3 November 2015 Interview by Imogen Rosenbluth.

Tenzin Nyinjey was born in India and educated in Tibetan refugee schools, where lessons were taught in three languages: Tibetan, Hindi and English. He began writing creatively during his time at the University of Wyoming; he felt a deep sense of "uprootedness," underscored by the fact that he was one of the only Tibetans on campus, and sought to alleviate this loneliness through personal writing.[26] After he graduated with an MA in Political Science, he returned to India, serving the Tibetan community in a succession of governmental roles, including in the Department for Information and International Relations of the CTA and as the Managing Editor of Tibet Journal, published by the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives. Today, he is an employee at the Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Development (TCHRD), where he devotes much of his time to promoting awareness of the current political situation within Tibet and the human rights violations being committed by the People's Republic of China (PRC) against Tibetans. Soft spoken and extremely well-read, his personality is nearly the antithesis of Tenzin Tsundue's, yet he writes with equal passion and purpose.

Nyinjey-lak is best known for the personal reflections he has published in such Tibetan news sources as Rangzen and Phayul. Some of his writing has sparked controversy, which he encourages; for Nyinjey-lak, literature should serve first and foremost to "make people think" and question their beliefs. Growing up without a homeland, he also viewed literature as a "virtual home," and particularly identified with political and historical fiction such as *Red Poppies* by the Chinese novelist Alai.[27] He takes great pleasure in reading literature about Tibet because he feels it brings him closer to his heritage. In a piece for Rangzen, he argued that reading can be a form of resistance, because it allows the reader to "experience" places and situations from which they have been banned.[28] For him, literature is the best way "to express love, passion…culture."[29]

Like Tsundue-lak, Nyinjey-lak believes that "being stereotyped is being subjected to violence."[30] He claims that, the longer the Chinese occupation continues, the more removed

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[26] Nyinjey, Tenzin. 6 November 2015. Interview by Imogen Rosenbluth
[27] Nyinjey, Tenzin. 6 November 2015. Interview by Imogen Rosenbluth
[28] *Nyinjey, Tenzin. "Literature as Resistance." Rangzen Alliance, February 16, 2015.*http://www.rangzen.net/2013/02/16/literature-as-resistance/
[29] Nyinjey, Tenzin. 6 November 2015. Interview by Imogen Rosenbluth
[30] Nyinjey, Tenzin. "The Weariness of Nothingness and Being Tibetan." Phayul, July 9, 2015.http://www.phayul.com/news/article.aspx?id=31711&t=1.

Tibetans become from their national pride and sense of mission, particularly with each new generation that is born in exile. One of his goals as a writer is to remind both Tibetans in exile and the rest of the world that his people are more than "peaceful, passive white doves"[31] and renew the sense of urgency that the global community once felt to free Tibet from Chinese rule.

Nyinjey-lak also feels strongly that the creation and consumption of literature among Tibetans has played and will continue to play a major role in the maintenance of a non-violent independence movement. "On the one hand you have poetry, and on the other you have a gun," he stated, in an attempt to emphasize the effectiveness of literary self-expression in diffusing extreme frustration and violent impulses. Unlike Tsundue-lak, Nyinjey-lak has chosen to write in English to appeal specifically to exiled youth, who are now brought up learning English and often feel at least as comfortable communicating in English as they are in Tibetan[32]

Nyinjey-lak urges foreign writers from democratic nations to acknowledge the privilege of free speech and recognize that not everyone can express themselves so freely. Those who enjoy such liberty have an obligation to lend their voice to those who cannot be heard. "An open society is possible only when we learn to speak truth to the powers that be," he declares in one of his most divisive articles, entitled "To Think Independently is More Important than Dogma," the thesis of which posits that the tulku[33] system is becoming just another way for the Chinese government to control the Tibetan people.[34] However, speaking the truth serves no purpose if there is no audience to hear it. Foreign writers, particular those from large, powerful countries, can attract such audiences and present the truth in a way that keeps them engaged, but first, they must listen carefully to the people they are attempting to empower.[35]

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[31] Nyinjey, Tenzin. "The Weariness of Nothingness and Being Tibetan." Phayul, July 9, 2015.http://www.phayul.com/news/article.aspx?id=31711&t=1.
[32] Nyinjey, Tenzin. 6 November 2015. Interview by Imogen Rosenbluth
[33] Reborn master of Tibetan Buddhism (the Dalai Lama, Panchen Lama and Karmapa are among the best tulkus)
[34] Nyinjey, Tenzin. "To Think Independently Is More Important than Dogma."Rangzen Alliance, April 27, 2013.http://www.rangzen.net/2013/04/27/to-think-independently-is-more-important-than-dogma/.
[35] Nyinjey, Tenzin. 6 November 2015. Interview by Imogen Rosenbluth

Bhuchung D. Sonam

Bhuchung D. Sonam in discussion. Image courtesy of the Huffington Post

Bhuchung D. Sonam is perhaps the best known and Tibetan writer in exile. He is one of the few modern Tibetan poets who was born in Tibet; he escaped when he was eleven years old and attended school in Dharamsala, at the Tibetan Children's Village, and later at St. Xavier's College, University of Baroda and even Emerson College in the United States. Since completing his education, Bhuchung-lak has published three books of poetry, one book of essays, and many articles. He is also the preeminent translator of modern poetry written by Tibetans in Tibet, and has compiled the authoritative anthology of contemporary Tibetan poetry, entitled *Muses in Exile*. He supplements his writing career with income from translation to English from Tibetan, so his livelihood is literally based on the interaction between the two languages, giving him a unique perspective on their respective poeticism.

Bhuchung-lak conducts himself according to a strict code based on his personal values. He refuses to translate Buddhist texts because he believes too great of an emphasis has been placed on Tibetan Buddhism, which detracts from the political and civil battle in which Tibetans are currently entangled. He believes that his role as a translator is to "broadcast the words of Tibetans inside Tibet to the rest of the world, because they cannot."[36] Nor does he merely mean to distribute it to Westerners; he has noted that many younger Tibetans lack the proficiency to read Tibetan literature, so he seeks to bridge the gap between exiles and those who remain in

[36] Sonam, Bhuchung D. 21 November 2015. Interview by Imogen Rosenbluth

Tibet, thus giving refugees who have never visited Tibet the chance to "experience" it through the eyes of their fellow countrymen.[37]

His poetry, however, is much more personal. "No creative artist should have a political agenda," he commented. "They should, however, have a sense of social responsibility."[38] For Buchung-lak, this means writing primarily as an "antidote to reality," an outlet for the pain, frustration, nostalgia, and grief he feels for his birthplace. Though he writes primarily for himself, his words ring true for many members of the refugee community, and eloquently articulate the complex experience of displacement. This is particularly evident in the following excerpt from one of his most recent poems, "I…":

I've lived in too many rented rooms

What I need is a home

A shoe rack fixed to the wall.

According to Bhuchung-lak, too few Tibetans tell their stories, and more individual perspectives would "bridge the gap between the foreign perception of Tibetans as a uniform group and the reality of the diversity within the Tibetan community."[39] He attributes the dearth of personal writings by Tibetans to their humble, submissive nature, and believes that attempts by Westerners to tell the life stories of Tibetans tend to be heavily influenced by the author's own cultural background.[40] Testimonials are only valuable if they are accurate, and Tibetan feelings and voices must not be lost amid secondhand accounts.

Even so, Bhuchung-lak does believe it is possible for foreign writers to contribute to the Free Tibet movement in a meaningful way. Like Tsundue-lak and Nyinjey-lak, he suggests that those with the freedom to speak freely exercise this right on behalf of Tibetans who are not as free, and use their talent and mastery of the English language to help tell the individual stories of Tibetans who do not or cannot tell them for themselves.[41]

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[37] "Bhuchung D. Sonam Launches His Latest Book: Yak Horns."
2012. *VOA*.http://www.voatibetanenglish.com/content/article/1416509.html.
[38] Sonam, Bhuchung D. 21 November 2015. Interview by Imogen Rosenbluth
[39] Sonam, Bhuchung D. 21 November 2015. Interview by Imogen Rosenbluth
[40] "Bhuchung D. Sonam Launches His Latest Book: Yak Horns."
2012. *VOA*.http://www.voatibetanenglish.com/content/article/1416509.html.
[41] Sonam, Bhuchung D. 21 November 2015. Interview by Imogen Rosenbluth

Ten Phun

Ten Phun in McLeod Ganj. Image courtesy of dancingyaks.com

Ten Phun is an upcoming young exile poet based in McLeod Ganj; his first book, *Sweet Butter Tea,* was published in October 2015, with a foreword by Bhuchung D. Sonam. A self-proclaimed "wanderer," Ten-lak can more often than not be found in one of McLeod Ganj's many cafes, and boasts an impressive number of friends and acquaintances across Dharamsala, many of whom affectionately refer to him as "Sweet Butter Tea." He is extremely personable and opinionated.

Born in Lhasa, Ten-lak escaped at age thirteen, studied at TCV, and has written poetry in both English and Tibetan. His writing has even less of a political agenda than that of Bhuchung-lak—he never even considered publishing his work until he showed his work to a few friends and they encouraged him to develop it further. Until that point, his personal poetry was purely "healing."[42] He chose to publish his first volume in English so that more people would "understand [his] experiences." Much of his writing consists of nostalgic accounts of his childhood in Lhasa and summers in Norbulingka, with more rich imagery than deep introspection. Despite this, his poetry is distinctly, almost uncomfortably personal, as if the reader has pierced Ten-lak's subconscious. From such poems as the one for which the book is name, it is easy to see that he writes for no one but himself:

[42] Phun, Ten. 24 November 2015. Interview by Imogen Rosenbluth.

He was born U-Tsang

Grew up with Khampas

And he has Amdo friends

If you don't like his accent

Taste his blood:

It's made of Tsampa and Chura[43]

Ten-lak considers it important that foreign writers show solidarity with their Tibetan counterparts, but prefers not to dictate the ways in which they do so. In his opinion, it is "all about intention."[44]

Conclusion

Despite certain fundamental differences of opinion and values, modern Tibetan poets in exile form an extremely tight-knit community. All four of the above poets have met and attended events with each other on multiple occasions, a few travel together regularly[45] and some have even reviewed each other's books for popular Tibetan websites and blogs.

Among the most significant similarities between the members of the group is their willingness to publicize their private thoughts, feelings and experiences in order to dispel the detrimental stereotypes of the Tibetan people. This is a formidable task, especially for such a small group. Though these writers work with dedication and determination, their cause could benefit greatly from the contributions of fellow Tibetans and even foreigners, though the best method of obtaining such contributions has not been definitively determined.

As mentioned above, established Tibetan writers are divided in their opinion of the role outsiders should play in the expansion of the modern Tibetan literary canon. Should foreigners teach Tibetan exiles to write their own stories, or should they encourage Tibetan exiles to

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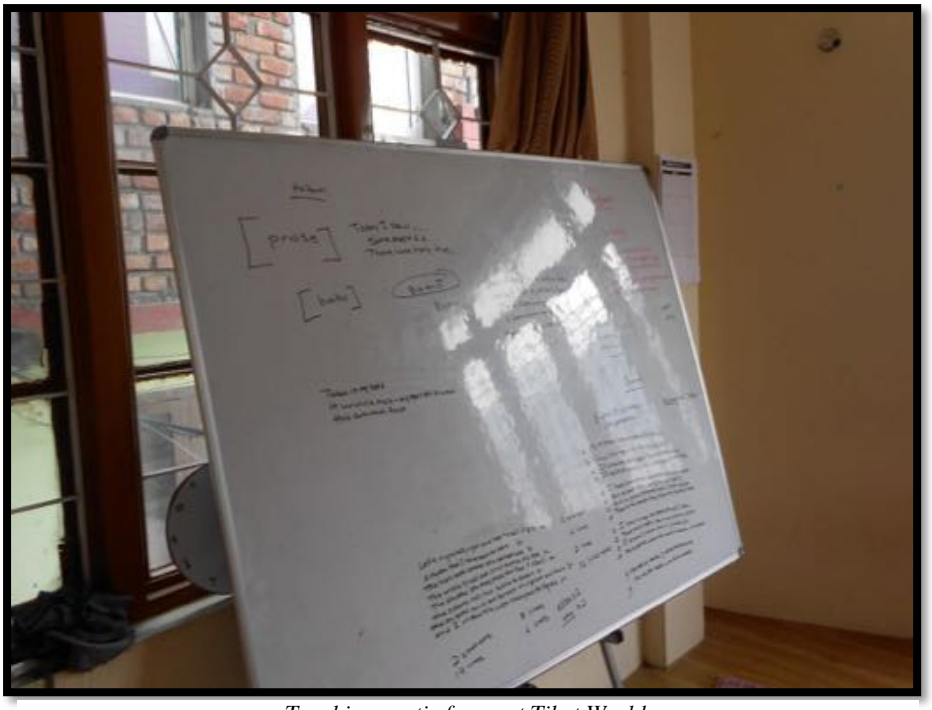
[43] Phun, Ten. 2015. *Sweet Butter Tea*. Dharamsala: Blackneck Books.
[44] Phun, Ten. 24 November 2015. Interview by Imogen Rosenbluth.
[45] Bhuchung-lak and Tsundue-lak traveled to Delhi for the Indian Languages Festival on the bus I took from McLeod Ganj to Delhi at the end of the research period

provide them with the oral material to tell these stories themselves? The following sections will explore the advantages, disadvantages, and effectiveness of each approach.

From Refugees to Writers

When I first proposed teaching a creative writing course for Tibetan refugees in India, several experienced academics warned me that I would likely struggle to convince my students to write about themselves. I was told that Tibetan children are raised to be humble and put others before themselves in all matters. These values become so ingrained that by the time they are adults, many Tibetans are uncomfortable with discussing themselves in any capacity.

Instead of deterring me, however, this warning piqued my interest. I wondered how I could convince these students that their stories are worth telling, and what they would produce when provided with the theory behind creating personal narratives. Though I only had the opportunity to observe the complete progress of three students, several interesting trends emerged over the course of the workshop that highlighted the implications of Tibetan literary self-representation. Two students in particular came to embody these implications well.



Teaching poetic forms at Tibet World.

Tenzin Wangyal

Tenzin Wangyal is a twenty-one year old Tibetan refugee born in an Indian town approximately six hours from McLeod Ganj. His parents are divorced; his mother remains in Wangyal's birthplace, but his father and stepmother live in Paris, France. He attended refugee schools, where he learned English from a young age, so he was relatively fluent and understood complex vocabulary.

Wangyal came to McLeod Ganj in August 2015 to complete a French course at Tibet World, as preparation to join his father in Paris in January of 2016. He joined the creative writing workshop on a whim—he had never written creatively before. Just before the course began, he had completed the second book he had ever read in his life, an autobiography by His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama.

Wangyal was consistently enthusiastic and engaged in class. In an effort to impress upon students the impact of personal narratives on the public perception of major conflicts, I brought in a copy of *The Diary of Anne Frank* on the second day of class and read an excerpt from it. Wangyal took a particular interest in the book, and approached me before class the next day with questions about the Holocaust and Judaism. I offered to let him borrow my copy of the book, assuring him that the language was fairly simple and the story quite engaging. He accepted eagerly and began reading it in his free time; towards the end of the workshop, I ended up giving him the book to keep because he was so eager to finish the story. He periodically pointed out similarities between Anne Frank's situation and that of Tibetan exiles, making connections such as "She cannot return to her home, and we cannot return to our home," and "She is afraid of Nazis like Tibetans are afraid of Chinese." As surprised as I was at his lack of knowledge about the Holocaust, I was equally impressed by how quickly and accurately he found parallels to her life in his own.

He was the first to begin writing in a testimonial style. I had planned my lessons to help students slowly warm to the idea of writing about themselves, focusing instead on conventions such as figurative language and observation. Three days into the workshop, I gave students the option of either describing their surroundings using figurative language or describing themselves. By the next class, Wangyal had written an entire confessional poem. It read as follows:

Born in India, but heart dies in Tibet.

Never known what it's like to be raised in Tibet.

Had a happy childhood with good and pure souls

Around me, watching over me like an angel.

Known as Tenzin Wangyal.

I am a chest in the ocean, with curly hair, sharp face

And skinny body, that's what you will see at first,

But hard to figure out from the inside.

After I am comfortable with you, I am open-hearted

Like the sky, having a clear vision like an eagle eye,

Full of humor and joy like a happy child.

Wrong and bad things don't bother me because I am

A rock in the wild nature. I am tough like a rock.

Loving and caring is what I have learned and know

About. Following dreams in my mind. Want to become the person

I dreamed of, and nothing shall stand in my way from grabbing

This dream. For now it's a dream, eventually someday it will be

Reality.

Wangyal had simply and eloquently represented himself in a poem before I had even asked him to write one, using figurative language he had only learned about a day before. It was almost as if he had been waiting for the opportunity to express himself in this way.

The day after he turned this poem in to me, he asked me to get tea with him after class so we could discuss possible revisions. I joined him at a nearby café, where we worked together on altering phrasing and changing line breaks for nearly an hour. By the end, he expressed

excitement about how well the poem was coming together. We got tea every day after class from then on.

Wangyal continued to personalize his assignments whenever possible. When I asked the class to make a timeline of important events in their lives from their birth to the present, Wangyal's timeline featured such items as the "first time I ate sheep brain," the "time I won the handwriting contest in sixth form" and even "starting the writing class." His life appeared to be broken down into snapshots of intense emotion, whether it be disgust, triumph, or curiosity. He experienced the world through its subtleties.

Wangyal's writing was so inspired and personal that it was hard for me to believe that he had never written creatively before. He seemed absolutely in his element when he was in class, and though he never developed his prewriting assignments into more formal pieces, he remained inquisitive and carefully compiled different literary terms and strategies in a notebook for future use, and would sometimes even take it out during our after-class conversations to record a tidbit he found particularly interesting. He had to return home before the end of the workshop, but he approached me on the last day to ask if he could email me any writing he did in the future. I agreed, and have been anxiously awaiting his next poem. I know Wangyal has the tools to tell his story in writing and understands how to use them; I hope he has continued to do so.

Kunga Rinchen in class at Tibet World

Kunga Rinchen

Kunga Rinchen is a monk at a monastery near the India-Tibet border. Born and raised in Kham (in the same village as acclaimed Tibetan poet Tsering Wangmo Dhompa), he escaped to India when he was thirteen years old, knowing only his local dialect. Twelve years later, he now speaks fairly good English and fluent Lhasa Tibetan. He came to Dharamsala in March 2015, at the behest of his rinpoche—he has been transcribing a calligraphic Buddhist text from his monastery into standard Tibetan script at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives for the past six months, with the intent of publishing it upon completion.

Rinchen was not a student at Tibet World prior to my workshop; a friend of his, who is learning English at Tibet World, told him about the course and Rinchen was interested enough to approach Dolma-lak for permission to attend. He joined the class on the fourth day of the workshop. Each and every day, Rinchen took a taxi from lower Dharamsala to McLeod Ganj to attend my class, and rode down again afterwards. He had written and published several traditional-style Tibetan poems, and was finishing a novel in Tibetan. He even wrote lyrics for a contest that ended up being used in a fairly popular Tibetan song, but he had never attempted to write creatively in English. He was determined to learn, however, in part so he could write the script for a short film he wanted to submit to the 2016 Dharamsala International Film Festival (DIFF). Though his English language proficiency was lower than the other two regular students in the class, he was the only one with previous experience writing creatively, and was impressively well-versed in classic English-language literature, which allowed him to make complex connections ("There are many em-dashes in Catch-22!" "Cormac McCarthy has very strange dialogue," etc.) as well as ask important questions ("When should I use second person point of view?", "How truthful must we be when writing about real events?", etc).

Interestingly, though Rinchen was extraordinarily prolific, turning in at least one poem or section of prose each day, he struggled to write about himself. Instead, he tended to focus on natural imagery, symbolism, and/or observations. Almost all of his poetry was written in four-line stanzas with two rhyming couplets each (similar to the form and rhyme scheme of some kinds of traditional Tibetan poetry), as in the example below:

The Old Man and the Evening Sun
(in Dharamsala)

It was a rainy day
I went by the narrow way
The sun had nearly set
The ground was still wet

There was an old man
Who lost interest
To see the sunset
I asked him once
Where are you looking at

He answered me
I am looking at the east
But the horizon is foggy
And my vision is blurry

I asked him once more
Why you looking at the east
Since the sun is setting west
Which is not last any more

He was trying to tell me something
But he was crying saying nothing
My heart was crying loudly
But I smiled him ruefully

The sun was setting in the west

The old man was heading to the east
I went on my own way
Without telling him good bye

A technically beautiful, meaningful, and visually striking poem, but not about Rinchen. He turned in six or seven such pieces over the course of the workshop. Each time I would praise his execution and encourage him to tell his own story, but he never put himself into his writing.

At first, I thought he was the humble, selfless Tibetan I had been warned about. But when he began to join Wangyal and me for tea after class, I discovered that he loved to recount stories of his life in Tibet, especially those about how naughty he was as a child. He is a dynamic storyteller, and I found myself looking forward to hearing his recollections. One of the most memorable stories he told at the café went as follows[46]:

> "When I was 11, Chinese officers came to my village for the first time, to collect taxes. I saw how anxious and afraid the older men of the village were about the visit. This confused me—these fearless elders, terrified about such a simple transaction. The meeting was to take place in a half-finished community hall, built at the instruction of the Chinese government. There were holes scattered within the walls of the hall, perfect for me to peer through and witness the proceedings. As the men began to file in, I noticed that they kept their distance from the Chinese officials at the front of the room, lingering timidly toward the back. One by one, each man was called before the Chinese and asked how many animals they owned. If the number he gave displeased the Chinese—perhaps because it was too low to merit any substantial tax money—they would accuse him of lying, fabricate a number of animals based on how much tax money they wanted, and tax him accordingly. The men had no choice but to try and pay the exorbitant taxes. And I watched the very people I looked at as so strong and powerful submit completely to Chinese scare tactics.
>
> My own father found himself owing a huge amount of money in taxes. Money was scarce, and the family was desperate. We didn't have the money to give, but no one knew

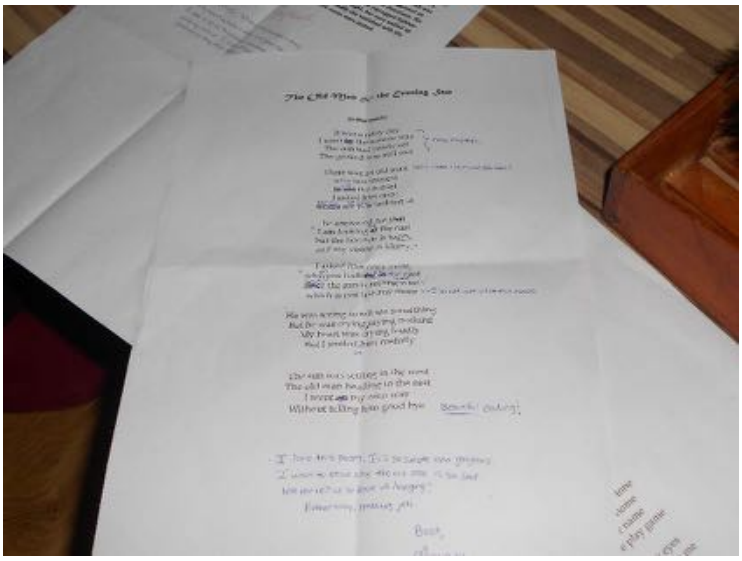
[46] Rephrased for clarity

> what would happen if we didn't pay. I was a novice monk at the time, and had received a single Chinese note from my rinpoche, which I treasured as if it were gold. My mother, knowing I had this note, ordered me to give it to my father to pay their taxes. I was reluctant, so, figuring the note was like gold and would still be valid when divided, I tore the note in half, stashed one half in my robes, and gave the other to my father. Naturally, my father was extremely angry and asked me to explain myself. There was nothing to do but put the torn note in the family's box of lucky or holy money (which is not meant to be spent). In order to pay the Chinese tax, my father had to break open the box and use all the money inside—except for the torn Chinese bank note."

This anecdote has all the elements of a compelling, subtle, emotionally-charged personal narrative that depicts the cruel reality of the Chinese occupation and what it meant for individuals—exactly the kind of work I was hoping to elicit from my students. But I could never convince Rinchen to write it down. He is a talented writer and a gifted storyteller, but he kept these two identities separate from each other throughout the workshop. Whereas Wangyal jumped at the chance to share his story in writing, Rinchen was infinitely more comfortable with the oral tradition.

Conclusion

Within a single, two-week long, three person class, I was confronted with two directly opposing responses to my instruction. Wangyal compiled the tools for his personal expression, but struggled to use them to create more developed pieces, while Rinchen mastered the conventions of creative writing but shied from using them to tell his own story. These different responses may stem from the contrasting backgrounds of the students: Wangyal is a young layperson, born in exile, so it follows that he would be more willing to subvert Tibetan literary traditions, particularly since his knowledge of them is limited. By contrast, Rinchen, as a Buddhist monk born and partially raised in Tibet, as well as a voracious reader, is more likely to struggle with the connotations of writing about himself given his devotion to Buddhist ideals, which promote the subjugation of ego, and his familiarity with traditional Tibetan literature.



The original manuscript of "The Old Man and the Evening Sun" by Kunga Rinchen

Based on my observations in the classroom, I conclude that the effectiveness of teaching creative methods of self-expression to Tibetans in exile depends heavily on the background of the students. Younger, less religious exiles who are further removed from Tibet and have less direct experience with traditional Tibetan culture, tend to be more open to using what they have learned to share their own stories in writing than their older, more devout counterparts, especially those who have escaped Tibet and have strong associations with classical Tibetan literary traditions. Therefore, an educational approach to the expansion of the modern Tibetan literary canon is most effective in the former population than the latter.

Part III: A Voice for the Silent

The students at Gu Chu Sum School almost invariably fall into the latter category—they have all escaped Tibet in the last decade, most are thirty years old or more, many are pious Buddhists, and English language proficiency among the students ranges from beginner to lower intermediate. Instead of attempting to teach the students to write their own stories, I volunteered at the Gu Chu Sum School's conversation class over a period of several weeks, where I developed relationships with the students and encouraged them to tell me about their lives, trading them basic English language instruction for their personal stories. I then attempted to distill the information they provided into short poetic snapshots of each student, striking a balance between what they told me and my own impressions of them. In this way, I experimented with preserving the Tibetan oral storytelling tradition while still capturing these important personal narratives in a form that allows for wider distribution.

Dolma-lak[47]

Dolma-lak during conversation at Gu Chu Sum School

First and above all,

She is a nomad.

Kham-pa[48], she says,

[47] All names have been changed to protect the subjects' privacy
[48] A person from the Kham province of Tibet

With the same practiced confidence
She lacks when she repeats after me:
"I am from Southeast Tibet."
Her pocket-sized life
Forever in flux:
Stay warm, stay healthy, stay together.
Three months to Lhasa, and when
The Communists turned her away,
She retraced her steps.
Half a year of complacency.

"*Shu me*[49]," she reveals, half-embarrassed.
Kham-pa are carnivores, but
When the only constant is
50 yak, 14 horses, 900 sheep…
She'd rather go hungry.

Earlobes forked like snake tongues
Tell of a rare resilience.
For 415,000 Nepali rupees,
She could leave her home,
Her siblings and identity behind:
What a deal!

Even her days are reversed,
Slogging through Himalayan snowdrifts by
Night, holding her breath
Until the starts give the all-clear.

[49] Tibetan for "vegetarian"

It takes four months to reach the Sun[50],
The Moon[51] long ago waned
Into a Chinese cradle.

She points at the world map,
Crumpling her brow in confusion.
The final N of "Tibetan Autonomous Region"
Covers her village.
Or where her village should be.
"What is autonomous?" she pleads.
The first synonym I think of is "free."
No.
"Independent."
No.
"Self-governing."
No.
"It's a lie."
She is distressed to find that
Even the maps have forgotten her.

I am teaching her the meaning of "unique."
"You are unique," I say.
"There is only one Dolma-lak."
"No," she replies.
"There are many Dolma-lak."

[50] Tibetan Buddhist symbolism representing the Dalai Lama
[51] Tibetan Buddhist symbolism representing the Panchen Lama; the 11th Panchen Lama was kidnapped by the Chinese government at the age of 6

Nyima-lak

Nyima-lak serenading me on the Tibetan guitar

Amdo[52]. Amdo. Amdo.

He chants like it's a mantra,

Like he'll forget.

He wants me to remember.

He is *drok-pa*[53],

He is Eldest Son,

He is 3.16.08[54]

Somewhere he cannot be,

His favorite ram is winning 60,000 Yuan[55].

His family is moving

From summer tent to winter house.

[52] A region in Northeast Tibet
[53] Tibetan for "nomad"
[54] Date of the Tibetan uprising in Amdo
[55] Approximately 10,000 USD

“I like boats.”
He misses flowing water.

His Tibetan/English dictionary
Calls me a hero,
And I wish I could say
He didn’t believe it.

Before I leave,
in the absence of an address,
He gives me his WeChat ID,
And hopes I won’t forget.

Amdo.

Tashi-lak

Tashi-lak and his friend at Gu Chu Sum School

When he learns English,
He will tell the world.
And it will listen.

He is sure of it.

He calls me “Gen lak”
And gives me mandarins,
Sees me out after every class.
Thanksmethanksmethanksme.

When the Dalai Lama brought
Western education to the monasteries
He flunked and left,
But still wears his robes.

When he learns English,
The world will crack open

Like an egg and spill

Into his palms.

He is sure of it.

Students at the Gu Chu Sum School

Conclusion: Tell the World I'm Coming Home

It is easy to underestimate the power of personalized writing, but historically, an individual's story has sparked the kind of global awareness necessary for significant change. What *The Diary of Anne Frank* did for the Holocaust, what *An Ordinary Man* did for the Rwandan genocide, what *A Long Way Gone* did for the civil war in Sierra Leone—I have hope that these effects can be replicated for the Chinese occupation of Tibet with the rise of Tibetan testimonial literature. With Tibet disappearing from maps and the occupation dragging on into its sixth decade, Tibetans require the attention of an international audience more than ever, before they and their cause are completely forgotten. Modern Tibetan writers are desperately trying to broadcast their stories in the hope of garnering support, but the movement is not big enough to capture even national attention—one would be hard-pressed to find a single book of modern Tibetan poetry in an American chain bookstore. With the publication of enough Tibetan perspectives, however, people around the world will be forced to acknowledge the rampant oppression of the Tibetan people and confront misconceptions and stereotypes that have masked the reality of their situation.

It is vitally important to understand the inherent differences between Tibetan literary culture and that of the English language. Tibetan literature has not traditionally centered on the self, and the very acts of reading and writing are not as universal as in most American and European societies. Furthermore, Tibetan is not as widely spoken or read as English. If more Tibetan refugees are to share their personal stories internationally, they will need the assistance of foreigners to produce work that will succeed in the most influential countries in the world. Those refugees who are sufficiently fluent in English and open to the idea of recording their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in writing to be shared with the world would benefit greatly from creative writing instruction. This approach ensures that these exiled voices are not eclipsed by Western biases or misunderstandings while still producing clear, engaging work that others will want to read. Tibetans who lack the ability and/or will to articulate themselves in writing could add their voices to the movement with the help of foreign writers who can be trusted to listen closely to their experiences and report them as faithfully and objectively as possible to the rest of world. In this way, exiled Tibetans can define themselves as they are instead of being

defined by the skewed representations of others, and finally begin to garner the empathy they deserve.

Appendix

Figure 1.1: Lesson plan for creative writing workshop at Tibet World, 13 November 2015

Lesson 2: Observation and Figurative Language

Primary Objectives

-share and discuss student work

-review the differences between seeing and observing

-introduce figurative language and its uses

-practice identifying similes and metaphors

-explain figurative language assignment

-administer post-class evaluation

Schedule:

Students share assignments. Discuss the observation assignment—was it easy? Difficult? Did it change the way you thought about your surroundings? (5 minutes)

- Students may read their own work aloud or have the instructor read it (anonymously or not)
- Instructor provides examples if no one wants to share
- What can we learn from our peers' observations? Were you surprised by any of them? Did you relate to any of them?

Seeing vs. Observing (5 minutes)

- Seeing is a physical act – you see with your eyes
    - I *see* my students. Tenzin's shirt is red. Dolma is holding a pencil.
- Observing is a mental act – you notice something special about what you see and consider what this special quality might mean for yourself or others
    - I *observe* that Tenzin is wearing a "Students for Free Tibet" t-shirt, which must mean that he is a student and he supports the Tibetan liberation movement. It might also mean that he is personally affected by the Chinese occupation, or that someone close to him is personally affected. He probably also lives in a community in which he can freely wear this shirt without fearing retaliation.

  - Dolma is holding a pencil, which means that she intends to write something soon. She may prefer pencils over pens because they have erasers and she doesn't like crossing her mistakes out. The eraser of her pencil has bite marks, so she probably chews it when she is nervous. What would Dolma be nervous about?
  - Observations are not necessarily always accurate. They say more about the observer than the thing he/she observes.
  - Two people might see the same thing but observe different things about it

Introduction to figurative language (15 minutes)

- Figurative language is used in writing to help the reader understand a sensation, emotion or experience they may not be familiar with through comparisons to more common or familiar things.
- By contrast, literal language uses a concrete definition
  - You would never find a simile or metaphor in a dictionary
- Similes use the words "like" or "as" to connect an unfamiliar sensation/emotion/experience to a familiar one
  - Light as a feather = gives the reader a sense of how heavy something is
  - Like a diamond in the sky = describes the way a star twinkles, how it looks
  - Other examples?
  - IMPORTANT: the words "like" or "as" don't necessarily make a simile
    - I *like* pizza is different than "the moon is *like* pizza"
- Metaphors connect two things by stating that one thing IS another
  - Her eyes were two stars in the dark room = tells the reader that her eyes are the only thing visible of her in the dark room, and explains that they twinkle like stars in the dark
  - You're a doll = compares the listeners' sweet personality to the one you'd expect a doll to have

Let's practice! (5 minutes)

- I'll give you an example, and you'll tell me whether it is a metaphor or a simile
  - He's as fierce as a dog
  - My mind is a busy marketplace
  - My love is like a red, red rose
  - Her heart is stone

Reading Practice (15 minutes)

- Now we will read 2 poems together and identify the figurative language in them
  - Dreams, Langston Hughes
    - Hold fast to dreams/For if dreams die/Life is a broken-winged bird/That cannot fly./Hold fast to dreams/For when dreams go/Life is a barren field/Frozen with snow.
  - Dream Deferred, Langston Hughes

- What happens to a dream deferred?/Does it dry up like a raising in the sun?/Or fester like a sore—And then run?/Does it stink like rotten meat?/Or crust and sugar over—like a syrupy sweet?/Maybe it just sags/like a heavy load./Or does it explode?

Figurative Language Assignment (10 minutes)

- This assignment will allow you to practice writing your own similes and metaphors!
- All levels: Think about the thing you wrote about for the last assignment. How can you use similes and/or metaphors to describe that thing?
- For those who did not complete the last assignment, choose an object you see every day and reinvent it using similes and metaphors.

After-class evaluation (5 minutes)

Class Dismissed!

Figure 1.2: Lesson plan creative writing workshop at Tibet World, 18 November 2015

Lesson 5: Testimony and Story Arcs

Primary Objectives:

-share timeline assignments

-discuss the importance of writing personal stories, especially as refugees

-introduce story arcs

-examine examples of different story arcs in flash fiction

-explain flash fiction assignment

-administer post-class evaluation

Schedule:

Students share their timelines. *Instructor draws all timelines on the board*. *Class considers the similarities and differences between them*. (5 minutes)

- There are two ways to write a personal testimony—either through one life event or over time

Why is it important to tell our stories? (10 minutes)

- Instructor poses question to class first.
- Bhuchung D. Sonam's "Of Exile, Youth and Writing"
    - "Confronted, early in life, with the terrible truth of being exiles, compounded by the need to survive in a testing world, Tibetan youths venture into many avenues to relieve their angst; writing seems to be the primary pressure valve.
    - "The experience of being driven from home, and the uncertainty of exile life, is emotionally daunting. Writing eases the pain. It salves the fear of extinction and rejuvenates the survival instinct."
    - "Imagination and observation of ordinary experiences in life are essential to write poetry."
- What advantages are there to writing in English specifically?
    - Because of colonialism and imperialism, English has become one of the most widely-spoken languages in the world; therefore, writing in English allows the `writer to broadcast his/her message and/or story to a wider variety and larger number of people
- Why is it important for young refugees in particular to tell their stories?

  - "I should tell my story in writing, not to advertise my suffering but as a testimony to my country's torment. In this way I could show that while I may be free, my country was still occupied."
  - "Perhaps through the story of my life I can tell the story of my country and give expression to the pain felt by every Tibetan."

Examine examples of testimonial writing in In the Absent Everyday by Tsering Wangmo Dhompa (5 minutes)

- "Autonomy of the Mind"

Introduction to story arcs, elements of a story, and different types of resolutions (10 minutes)

- A story arc is the pattern a story follows from beginning to end
  - The simplest form is intro, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution
    - Doesn't always flow this way! In fact, most stories are not this straightforward
- Elements of a story
- Types of resolutions
  - "happily ever after"
  - Twist ending
  - Ambiguous ending (the reader is left wondering what happened at the end)
  - Tragic ending
  - Comedic ending
  - No resolution

Introduction to flash fiction (5 minutes)

- Flash fiction is like a mini-story
  - Most of the time flash fiction is under a page and can be as short as a paragraph
  - As long as it has all the elements of a compelling story, it can be as short as you like
  - Can cover a tiny span of time (like a blink) or a large one
- Why might one want to write flash fiction rather than a short story or a longer work?
  - Think back to the purpose behind haikus

Read flash fiction with different types of story arcs (10 minutes)

- "The Tempest"
  - As momentum built, the water began to whirl and froth, some of it rising in huge waves to crash over the edge. There was no escape. No way to stop the waves other than wait for granny to stop stirring.
    "And that," she said, "taking a dishcloth in her hand, is what we call a storm in a teacup."
- Youth In Orbit, Aaron Teel
  - We wanted to be the first children in space, but by the time we finished building our rocket, we were very old and our hearts weren't in it anymore. We launched

> ourselves anyway, and our children's children's children were there to see us off.Our children's children's children wanted to come, but our children's children thought it might not be safe, and anyway, we thought, why should they get to be the first children in space? Build your own damned rocket.We listened while our children and our children's children and our children's children's children counted backward in the yard.

Practice coming up with "story skeletons" (5 minutes)

- Choose a point on your timeline or a particularly vivid memory
    - Maybe a story you remember about yourself from your childhood?
- Make a story skeleton like the one for a typical story arc, following the events in your story
    - Are they negative or positive? Are they exciting or boring? Is there a twist ending?
- Not everyone likes to plan their story ahead of time! Some authors just start writing and see where their mind takes them

Flash fiction assignment (5 minutes)

- Make the story you made a skeleton for into a flash fiction, or write about another time in your life.

After-class evaluation (5 minutes)

Class Dismissed!

Figure 2: After-Class Evaluation distributed to students in the creative writing workshop at Tibet World (only used between 12 November 2015 and 16 November 2015)

Date:_____

After-Class Evaluation

Please complete the sentences by circling one or more options from the list.

I thought today's class was…(circle as many words as you like!)

Interesting

Boring

Helpful

Unhelpful

Clear

Unclear

Other:

Today's class was…

Very Easy

Pretty Easy

A Little Easy

Just Right

A Little Difficult

Pretty Difficult

Very Difficult

After today's class, my confidence about myself and my writing skills has…

Increased

Decreased

Stayed the Same

In future classes, I would like to try/review/write about/discuss:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

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Suggestions for Further Research

1. What affect, if any, has modern Tibetan testimonial literature had on the global perception of Tibetans and the Free Tibet movement?
2. Has there been any resistance from the Buddhist community regarding testimonial or confessional writing?
3. How difficult is it for Tibetan writers to get published in Dharamsala? In Tibet? In America? In Europe?
4. How has the development of modern Tibetan literature paralleled that of Tibetan rap music? How has it varied?
5. Is self-representation equally scarce in other traditional Tibetan art forms? Why or why not?
6. Why are there so few Tibetan females writing testimonial or confessional poetry?
7. Outside of subject matter, what other conventions characterize modern Tibetan poetry?

A portrait of the author, taken by one of her students at the Gu Chu Sum School